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Potential Implications of Sociocultural Theory for ALTs in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to examine the role of the Assistant Language Teacher in Japanese elementary schools in terms of sociocultural theory in second language learning. It will examine learner to leaner and teacher to learner discourse typically found in language classrooms and discuss some of the relevant research carried out in the field. This will then be related back to the context of Japanese elementary school English language classes. The paper will then move on to consider the potential implications of this research for English language classes in this context. Finally, the role of the ALT will be reconsidered from a sociocultural theory perspective and an argument for the importance of the ALT's role will be made.

KEYWORDS : second language learning, Sociocultural Theory, ALT, Japanese elementary schools

1. Introduction

This article sets out to consider some of the potential implications of sociocultural theory for the role of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Japanese elementary school classroom discourse. It is hoped a clearer picture of the benefits created by the ALT's participation in the classroom conversation will thus emerge. Interest in this area stems from previous reading about the work of Lev Vygotsky (Bruner, 1985) and the implications of his theories in the field of second language learning. Discussion with native English speakers working as ALTs in several Japanese elementary schools prompted reflection on the ALT's role in the classroom through the lens of sociocultural theory (SCT).

The exact nature of the ALT's role in English language classes varies considerably based on many variables including location, teaching experience, class size and the personality/pedagogy of the Japanese teacher of English (JTE) with whom the ALT is working. The basic role of the ALT could be seen as acting as a natural model for language and to provide students with a genuine communicative need to use English. Due to recent changes in the English curriculum for Japanese elementary schools (MEXT, 2014) there is an increasing focus on the provision of English classes and an increasing number of ALTs employed in this sector of the Japanese education system. These issues along with some of the problems and difficulties faced by ALTs are discussed by Luxton, Fennelly and Fukuda (2014, pp. 47-48).

The question explored below is how this role relates to Vygotsky's views on learning and the SCT as it applies to second language learning. The article will survey these theories along with some of the research conducted in this area before revisiting the role of the ALT in light of SCT.

2. Language Learning or Learning Language?

Sociocultural theory (SCT) looks at the acquisition of language from a different perspective to other theories based around cognitive acquisition or innate language capabilities (Block, 2003; Dörnyei, 2009; Gass and Mackey, 2012). From a sociocultural perspective the crucial factor in the development of language acquisition is the social and cultural role that language plays and the interdependent relationship between 'the way people think and their

social behaviour' (Foley & Thompson, 2003, p. 58). SCT was developed by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who worked with children during the 1920s and 1930s within the Soviet Union (Pass, 2004; Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 25).

Vygotsky developed the idea of a 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 187) which theorises a situation in which a learner is capable of greater development than would be possible if the learner were isolated due to the support provided by an 'interlocutor' (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 118). Bruner (1985) adopted the term 'Scaffolding' to describe this phenomenon. In this model it is social interaction that becomes the driving force behind cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1986). Lantolf (2000, p. 17) explains that the ZPD is not a physical reality or fixed to a specific point in time but a 'metaphor for observing and understanding how mediational means are appropriated and internalised'. Vygotsky used the term 'mediated' to describe the process through which the human mind interacts with the world. Thus human languages are 'symbolic (or psychological) tools' (Lantolf, 2000, p. 1) used in a similar way as humans use physical tools to change the world around them. It is with the symbolic tool of language that humans 'establish an indirect, or *mediated*, relationship between ourselves and the world' (ibid, italics in original).

Following the arguments made by Block (2003), it is the placement of social interaction at the heart of language development that makes SCT fascinating. Most other theories in the field focus on the individual learner's own innate or cognitive language abilities but fail to consider the effects of the social context, and the need to communicate within it, in which the learner is rooted. This view of the learner as being in a dynamic relationship with those around them seems to reflect the reality of human learning more accurately than one that isolates the learner and views language development as essentially an internal individualistic phenomenon (Block, 2003). In this paper we will examine some of the research carried out from a SCT perspective in terms of classroom dialogue between learner and learner and between teacher and learner and attempt to relate this to the context of Japanese elementary school English classes.

3. Review of SCT Research

3.1 Researching Classroom Discourse between Learners

An interesting piece of research was carried out by Kowal and Swain (1997) on learners involved in a French language immersion course. Through an analysis of the language output produced by the students involved in the programme Kowal and Swain noticed how the students overcame gaps in their linguistic knowledge whilst working in pairs. In the example of the conversation between 'Sofie' and 'Rachel' there was an observable process of creating and testing a hypothesis about the grammatical item the pair were working on. This process was triggered by the realisation of a gap or lack of knowledge about the item in question. Each member of the pair put forward their ideas which in turn led to the other member proposing adjustments to their hypothesis. As a final act of arbitration, the pair consulted a dictionary to test the validity of their hypothesis. As such the pair had worked collaboratively to solve the issue they faced and through an analysis of the dialogue revealed the deliberate cognitive processes involved (ibid).

Swain (2000, p. 98) subsequently became interested in the apparent deficiencies in the learners written and spoken French, in terms of grammatical errors and non-standard usage, despite many years of French language learning. From this Swain concluded that 'comprehensible input' alone was insufficient for learners to progress further than their existing

level of language competence. Consequently, Swain began to look at the role of language output in the learning process. Swain observed that language output 'in the form of collaborative dialogue, is used to mediate their understanding and solutions' (ibid, p. 102). Swain goes on to theorise that this collective accomplishment in knowledge creation, though 'socially constructed', could be used by each individual in their future use of the second language (ibid, p. 104).

Negueruela (2008) conducted research into the development of native English speakers understanding of the 'conceptual grammar' behind the use of modality in Spanish and the effects of this understanding on the levels of performance seen in the learners. Negueruela's underlying theoretical basis for his research was based on the belief that 'individual cognition emerges through socioculturally mediated activity. The process of internalisation, the in-growing of cognitive tools is not direct, but mediated' (ibid, p. 195). As part of his application of Vygotskian principles to the field of second language learning, Negueruela adapted Vygotsky's ZPD adopting the alternative term 'Zone of Potential Development (ZPOD)' (ibid, p. 198). This reflects Negueruela's view of the 'potential' nature of cognitive development and the dependency of the process on the types of 'tools' and activities through which learners engage with language. In this context tools refer to the 'symbolic' tools used in the process of mediating the mind and are semiotic in essence (ibid, pp. 190-191).

Neguerula's (2008) research was carried out in a North American University and consisted of a standard syllabus that included activities 'from a concept-based approach to teaching' (ibid, p. 202). These activities are described as 'self-explaining' and in which the learners 'utilise the concepts to make sense of utterances' (ibid, p. 203). These activities also featured opportunities for the learners to explain to themselves and to other learners the concepts being examined in terms of what the speaker or writer wishes to convey by the use of the grammatical form; Negueruela terms this as 'verbalization' of the concept (ibid, p. 211). The research findings of Negueruela's study seem to indicate the positive results of a concept-based approach to developing understanding of grammatical forms, and the benefits to the learners' understanding of the meanings behind speakers' or writers' choices of grammatical forms. This is achieved by the deliberate verbalisation of the learner's cognitive processes as both individuals and as part of a group. On reflection one of the participants in the study noted 'the importance of reasoning and avoidance of short cuts to generating the correct form' (ibid, p. 220).

Another piece of research that indicates the potential benefits of consciously discussing aspects of the language being studied was carried out by Kim and Lantolf (2016). This study looked at the results of a specific instructional programme aimed at helping second language learners of English improve their ability to detect and understand the use of sarcasm in English. The instructional approach used in the study was based on Vygotskian principles of how learners internalise conceptual knowledge (ibid). The instruction consisted of helping learners to create visual representations of the emotions associated with sarcasm use in English as well as visual diagrams of the position of facial features and the social contexts in which sarcasm might be used within native English-speaking cultures (ibid). This was also combined with learners explaining and discussing their ideas and understanding with each other and with the instructor. The results of the post-test and interview suggested an improvement in the learners' abilities to identify sarcasm in English. Interestingly, the interviews also revealed that the learners felt they had developed a deeper understanding of sarcasm in their first language and an appreciation that 'learning English is not simply a matter of translating texts

or decoding utterances; rather, they realized the importance of focusing on the speakers' intentions' (ibid, p. 227).

In the context of Japanese elementary school English classes, the age and English abilities of the learners may create a barrier to the types of learner to learner discourse described above. However, there remain potential opportunities in encouraging learners to talk about what they have been working on and what they think about the language and processes involved. On a practical level this could be accomplished in the learner's first language. The role of the JTE is critical in facilitating and monitoring this discourse amongst learners. The role of the ALT in this situation could take the form of asking learners about any differences or similarities between the way people say something in English and Japanese. One example of this mentioned by ALTs is the difference in animal sounds used by English and Japanese speakers. After demonstrating the sound of an animal, the ALTs observed learners naturally discussing the differences between the English and the Japanese sound. This could provide a good starting point for learners consciously discussing possible reasons for such differences with each other and could lead naturally into other areas of comparison.

3.2 Researching Classroom Discourse between Teacher and Learner

Cullen's (2002) research into the strategies employed by a teacher during the management of the 'I-R-F (Initiate-Respond-Follow-up)' cycle reveals an interesting dimension to a familiar feature of many second language classrooms (ibid, p. 117). Through analysis of transcripts of the exchanges between the teacher and students taking part in an English as a foreign language class at a secondary school located in Tanzania, Cullen identified two main functions performed by the I-R-F cycle. The first, and perhaps most familiar to language teachers, is that of the 'evaluative role' (ibid, p. 119). The purpose of the evaluative role in Cullen's analysis is to 'provide feedback' (ibid, p. 119) to students on their performance.

The other role identified by Cullen, and the one of particular interest from a SCT perspective, is the 'discoursal role' (Cullen, 2002, p. 119); the discoursal role of the I-R-F cycle allows the teacher to create and maintain a dialogue with the students. Cullen notes how the teacher uses the discoursal role to draw the whole class's attention to the contributions of individual students and thus 'to feed students' contributions into the emerging class discussion' (ibid, p. 122). Cullen concludes that 'the teacher's follow-up moves play a crucial part in clarifying and building on the ideas that the students express in their responses, and in developing a meaningful dialogue between teacher and class' (ibid, p. 126).

Mercer's (2001) research into the 'use of language as a medium for teaching and learning' (ibid, p. 243) also focuses on the role of the I-R-F cycle in the classroom. Mercer's analysis of the language used by teachers in the process of teaching has led him to conclude that language is the 'principal tool' (ibid, p. 243) through which the different roles involved in teaching are realised in the classroom. In Mercer's view the typical types of interaction observed during the I-R-F cycle serve a wide range of purposes such as eliciting knowledge, responding to learners and what Mercer terms as the description of shared experiences. He makes the salient point that often these kinds of interaction serve more than one purpose simultaneously (ibid). Mercer follows a Vygotskian viewpoint in describing the typical types of teacher-learner interaction seen in the I-R-F cycle as 'teachers attempting to shape language into a set of suitable tools for pursuing their professional goals' (ibid, p. 246).

Another significant aspect of Mercer's view is the importance of the teacher's role in helping learners to appreciate where and how the topics they are studying fit into the wider learning experience;

Mercer states that a 'continuous shared experience is one of the most precious resources available' (Mercer, 2001, p. 248). By using particular forms of language, the teacher can help create a sense of learning continuity within the classroom (ibid).

An auto ethnographic study carried out by Jenks (2017) into the processes involved in his re-learning of Korean illustrated the importance of social interaction. He concluded 'social interaction helps me re-acquire previously forgotten linguistic information' (Jenks, 2017, p. 701). Jenks also noted how he felt he used his previous learning experiences to improve his 'communicative competence' (ibid, p. 701).

An example of this type of classroom exchange from a Japanese elementary school English class was demonstrated in a conversation about baseball. The ALT in this particular class was asking what sports the learners enjoyed. Baseball proved to be a popular sport amongst the learners. The ALT subsequently asked about favourite players. This led to a number of students using the target language to express their like and indeed dislike for a number of players and this developed into a discussion about good and bad teams and the difference between sports played in Japan and the ALT's home country. The ALT in this situation used their role to help create and shape a natural dialogue between the learners and teacher. In doing so the ALT not only provided a more realistic situation for practicing the language the learners where in the process of studying but also expanded this into other areas and prompted a conscious analysis of differences in sports between the two cultures.

4. Potential Classroom Implications of Sociocultural Theory

The practical working relationship between ALTs, JTEs and learners within this context is subject to a number of difficulties as described by Luxton, Fennelly and Fukuda (2014, pp. 46-48). From a SCT perspective the process of working through any language or cultural barriers, in the form of a dialogue between these three parties, may indeed prove a valuable part of the second language learning process. The dialogue created when a JTE is explaining to learners something said by the ALT could help the learners develop their English abilities.

In terms of the type of language learning situations that occur in the classroom, Van Lier notes that there have been moves away from 'teacher fronted activities' whilst 'increasing learner-learner interaction' (Van Lier, 2001, p. 103). However, he argues that although learner-learner interaction is important in the language learning process, for the opportunities it offers in terms of symmetrical, balanced and contingent dialogue, learners still require 'direct interaction with the teacher' (ibid, p. 104). This provides a rationale for the teacher to refrain from abandoning all areas of teacher led interaction or learning strategies, especially if these can be done in a way that mitigates some of the inherent imbalances in teacher-learner interaction; this could be accomplished by focusing on topics or situations where the learners have more knowledge or experience than the teacher (ibid). In practical terms for this teaching context this could be realised by shifting the emphasis of class discourse away from English as a foreign language and towards a topic like baseball or Japanese food discussed through the medium of English. The role of the ALT could include encouraging learners to add extra information to other learners' answers as well as asking the learners to give information about their local community or Japan in general. These are both fields where the learners may well know more than the ALT.

Due to the age and language abilities of the learners in this context it may prove difficult to introduce some of the features of leaner to learner

discourse discussed above. However, the potential results could be worth the effort and help to develop the learners' perspectives on second language learning. The role of the ALT in this context again involves providing a genuine communicative need and the support and scaffolding needed to enable the students to engage in these kinds of activities in English. The role of the JTE in this context would be crucial in guiding the learners and monitoring their progress through the use of their first language. By working together in both Japanese and English the ALT and JTE could potentially facilitate the kind of learner to learner discourse described by the researchers in the field.

By considering the processes involved in second language acquisition through the lens of SCT and in considering the research and writings of the linguists in this field, the significance of the dialogue or conversation that takes place within the second language classroom becomes apparent. Returning to the role of the ALT proves illuminating when viewed from a SCT perspective. The ALT can be seen to provide the role of 'interlocutor' (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The authors have experienced numerous exchanges between learners, JTEs and ALTs in the classroom in which the three parties share ideas or information back and forth in English and Japanese in order to come to an understanding. Each of these exchanges could be viewed as a stage in the construction of the 'scaffolding' described by Bruner (1985). The presence of the ALT and the genuine need to communicate in English is instrumental in this process.

These insights also indicate the potential disadvantages of ALTs restricting their classroom language to words or phrases the learners have already mastered. This type of restriction on the English language used in the classroom represents a barrier to the processes central to a SCT view of second language learning. This is not intended as a call for ALTs to cease grading or thinking carefully about their language choices in the classroom but rather an indication of the potential positive effects on learners from their engagement in the process of negotiating understanding.

This could also indicate the advantages of encouraging the learning processes discussed earlier along with the use of the learners' L1 to facilitate discussion of their cognitive development. The role of the JTE is again crucial in this area.

5. Conclusions

To return to the analogy of language as a tool, SCT offers a way of understanding how the use of this tool not only shapes the medium the tool is working on, social interaction and the world around the user, but also the nature of the tool itself and indeed the user's own understanding of the world and cognitive processes. As such the potential advantages of encouraging these types of language interactions within the second language classroom become clear. The role of the ALT within Japanese elementary schools has an important part to play in the development of the learner's English language tools. Despite the difficulties and barriers to communication discussed by Luxton, Fennelly and Fukuda (2014, pp. 46-48) the process of negotiating meaning and understanding that take place between learners, JTEs and ALTs has many potential benefits when viewed from a SCT perspective.

There are thus potential and sometimes overlooked opportunities in situations where all the parties involved in this context fail to immediately understand one another and instead must move through a process of reaching a shared understanding. By discussing these situations in both English and Japanese and in exchanges between all three parties in the classroom valuable learning opportunities can occur. As such there are also possible benefits to be gained from using language that is not totally familiar

to learners, but which creates, with the help of the scaffolding process described above, the potential for language learning. The role of the ALT within this context is crucial in facilitating these processes and creating a springboard for the learners' exploration of the English language.

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